

GROW

AN SMBS SERIES

Lesson 8 – The Right Strength

Teacher Edition



Review: So far we have seen that in order to change, you have to want to change and you have to be given a new nature so that you can change. Next we saw that in order to change, you need God’s help, although God still requires you to put forth effort as well. Then we got a broad overview of God’s masterplan for change: put off, be renewed, put on, and examined what it means to put off sin and what it means to be renewed.

Overview: This lesson will further examine how God renews us by examining a major component of renewal – grace.

Introduction: Scripture will often use different images and language to describe the same concepts. Last week we saw our need to be renewed. In this lesson, we are going to look at another way Scripture describes this same process that focuses more on God’s part in our renewal: grace. God helps us change, renewing us through his grace.

Few concepts today are as misunderstood as grace. Ironically, grace often becomes an excuse for a lack of spiritual growth. Sadly enough, grace can even become a way for people to hide and excuse their sin. People look at their sin and rather than being grieved by it, they just shrug their shoulders and praise God that it’s all covered by his grace, only to go and sin again. A few years ago, a blog article circulated the internet that demonstrated this type of thinking. The following paragraph sums up the general thrust of the post:

“You cannot sanitize grace. You can’t stuff it into a blue blazer and make it wear khakis. Grace is messy, offensive and it sometimes

misses church. To expect God to pump prefabricated plastic moral people out of a religious factory is to neuter grace and chain it inside a gated community. If God's scandalous relationship with the 12 thugs [the disciples] means anything, then we should expect a variegated spectrum of righteousness and be patient—or repentant—when such sanctification doesn't meet our expectations. God meets us in our mess and pushes holiness out the other side."¹

What about this statement is wrong? What about it is true?

People abusing grace is nothing new; however, it's as old as the gospel itself. Paul confronts the readers of the epistle of Romans with this kind of thinking, and then denies it in the strongest terms possible (Romans 6:1-2). Both in Paul's times and in ours, people tend to misunderstand what grace is, what it does, how to get it, and what it requires. Today we will seek to answer those four questions as we take a look at this critically important part of the renewal and growth process.

A. The Definition of Grace

Grace is quite buzzword these days. People want grace-filled lives and grace-centered ministries. Grace is one of those terms everyone loves to use but few people truly understand. Unfortunately, when certain words are used all the time, the result is that they lose their impact or their meaning begins to be foggy. Grace is a powerful concept, and understanding it properly is crucially important.

1. A position of favor

The basic meaning of the word grace is "favor." Dictionary.com defines favor as "friendly or well-disposed regard; goodwill. . . the state of being approved or held in regard. . . excessive kindness or unfair partiality; preferential treatment:"² Grace means that God treats us kindly when he should treat us harshly. The Greek word for grace is sometimes used of people showing favor to other people, such as in Acts 2:47, Luke 2:52. Because of our sins, we stand before God deserving

¹ <https://faithit.com/f-bombs-and-bikinis-what-it-really-means-to-be-a-christian/>

² Definitions 2-4; <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/favor>

condemnation and rejection, yet God looks at us and favors us when by all accounts he shouldn't.

(Illustration) When Lincoln became president, one of the things he did that was somewhat startling to people was pick a cabinet full of people who had previously been his opponents. Those who, during the campaign had attacked him were surprisingly given positions of leadership inside the new administration. This "team of rivals" pictures for us on a microscopic level what God has done for us on a macroscopic level. We were enemies of God, yet rather than destroy us, he granted us a full and free pardon (Ephesians 1:7). Beyond that, he made former rebels ambassadors of his good news (2 Corinthians 5:20).

What are some ways that God's favorable position towards us is seen? (salvation – Titus 2:11; spiritual inheritance – Ephesians 2:6-7; practical help – 2 Corinthians 12:9)

2. Divine enablement (i.e. God's help)

The second way in which we understand grace builds on the second way. God's kind regard for us results in his giving us help or strength when we need it. The classic example of this comes when Paul faced a trial so hard he didn't think he could make it and asked God three times to remove it. God's response was "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Grace here is clearly synonymous with power or ability to live life the way we need to.

Several other passages, however, clearly develop the teaching that God's grace is his favor in action, helping us to live holy and righteous lives. When Stephen went to preach his final sermon before the hostile crowd of self-righteous Jews, the Scriptures tell us that he was full of "grace and power" (Acts 6:8). Here grace and power are clearly being used synonymously, both meaning essentially the same thing. Grace is power. We will be returning to Hebrews 4:16 later, but let us note here that

approaching the throne of grace gives us grace to help in time of need. Finally, Scripture describes the heart as being strengthened by grace (Hebrews 13:9). All of this shows that grace can mean the supernatural help that God gives us to renew us, allowing us to live holy lives.

B. The Purpose of Grace

God's grace, his disposition of favor and the help that disposition gives us, is designed to have a certain impact. Many people are content to marinate in their sins and yet praise God for his love and grace. But God's grace is supposed to accomplish certain things in our lives. If we are to truly appreciate and revel in grace, we must seek to make sure that we are using that grace well, lest we infuriate our God (Hebrews 10:29).

1. Grace encourages us (2 Thessalonians 2:16).

This verse teaches that God gave us "eternal comfort and good hope through grace." The fact that God is favorable towards us when he should desire to wipe us off the face of the earth ought to be a source of great encouragement. It ought to motivate and inspire us. It ought to bring us hope. Meditating on God's grace is appropriate, and can be helpful. In our battle against sin, remembering that we have never earned God's favor can give us the courage to run to Christ, even as remembering that God takes our sin seriously will cause us to hate our sin.

2. Grace inspires worship (Ephesians 1:6-7).

Ephesians 1 is a glorious poem about all that God has done for us in Christ. Yet all that God has done he has done "for the praise of his glorious grace." Thinking about the fact that God is in his disposition of favor has richly blessed beyond all that we could hope or think ought to create within us a desire to love and worship him in response.

3. Grace motivates obedience (1 Peter 1:13).

In 1 Peter 1:13 the author tells us to "set [our] hope fully on the grace that will be brought" to us at Christ's second coming. This

is done while “preparing [our] minds for action and leads in verses 14 and 15 to holy living. Paul warns against those who would receive God’s grace and then continue living in sin (Romans 6:1-2).

(Illustration) If you went to work every day for a lousy boss who didn’t like you, it would probably make it hard to listen to him. When he gave directives, you would hopefully follow them, but would find it difficult to do so. When he corrected your work you would probably seethe on the inside. If you had a great boss who was competent at his job and sought to treat you well, no doubt your feelings would be different. His criticisms would be taken as helpful. His instructions would not bother you, even if they made life a little more difficult. Knowing that our authority is for us ought to make obeying them a little easier. Parents whose children rebel will often point to the good things they have done, the favor they have shown, and ask how it is that their ungrateful child could do such a thing. We all understand intuitively that those who treat us well deserve a hearing. If this is true for our earthly authorities, how much more should God’s grace towards us inspire us to live holy lives today?

4. Grace trains us (Titus 2:11-14).

In this passage, Paul tells us that God’s grace has appeared, bringing salvation but also training us to renounce a sinful lifestyle and to live “self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.” The word for “training” means essentially “child-rearing” and can describe “assist[ing] in the development of a person’s ability to make appropriate choices.”³ Grace wants to make us is into fully functioning, Christ reflecting spiritual adults.

³ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 749.

Grace should warm our hearts, but it should also reform our conduct. Grace ought to encourage us and inspire worship, but it also ought to affect the way we live. Grace is not for those who want to keep on sinning, but for those love God and want to stop sinning.

In what ways can practically meditate on grace to help you in your spiritual growth?

C. The Means of Grace

So how do we get grace this strengthening, purifying grace of God? How practically does grace (God's help to change) come our way? Theologians describe what they call the means of grace (the channels through which God's grace comes). In Scripture, we see three means or channels of grace. Some denominations would add other means of grace, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper. Scripture never connects observing these commands with receiving any kind of extra, supernatural grace, however. So for our study, we will be focusing exclusively on the means God has clearly laid out for us in Scripture. We will be looking at three passages, each one specifically tying grace to one of three different activities.

- 1. God's Word gives us grace (Acts 20:32).**
- 2. Prayer gives us grace (Hebrews 4:16).**
- 3. Fellowship gives us grace (Ephesians 4:29).**

In our next four lessons, we will be examining these three means of grace in greater depth and seeking to show their necessity for spiritual growth and how we can most effectively use them (God's Word will get two lessons, if you were wondering about the math).

D. The Prerequisite for Grace (James 4:6).

We are entering tricky ground here. God's grace is free and unmerited, or it wouldn't be grace (Romans 11:6). This grace, however, is the favor aspect. In other words, God's favor can't be bought or earned, nothing that you or I could say or do could earn God's favor. We have it and that's enough.

But, the New Testament is clear that if we want grace, as in God's enabling power to live rightly, if we want God's grace to be seen in our lives, there is a prerequisite. There is something that must be true in our lives. We must be humble. Both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 makes this point abundantly clear when they say, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Can you think of any Scriptural examples of humble people God exalted or proud people God opposed?

How can we demonstrate pride before God that would keep him from extending grace to us?

How can we demonstrate humility before God that would allow him to extend grace to us?

Proud people will remain unchanged, and pride is a difficult sin to root out because one of the first things pride does is convince you that you aren't proud. If you think you aren't proud, here's a list to help you take inventory. Warning, these will step on some toes!

- Do you find yourself getting angry? Angry people are proud people, because they think they deserve better. An angry spirit is a sign of pride.⁴
- Do you ever think that you are better than other people or find that you think you can do more than you really can? (Hint: If you're constantly wondering why no one seems recognize your gifts and abilities, it most likely is because you have an overinflated view of self).
- Do you ever get discouraged by your lack of gifts and abilities, always focusing on yourself and how inadequate you are, rather than accepting what God has and has not given you and seeking to serve him with that?

⁴ Many of these adapted from Stuart Scott's chapter on pride in *The Exemplary Husband*.

- Do you talk too much? Do you love to be the center of attention? Are you convinced that what you have to say is so crucially important that everyone should listen up?
- Are you consumed by what other people think about you? Do you spend much time wondering how what you said went over or how a certain person might have perceived you?
- When was the last time you admitted to someone you were wrong? When was the last time you said those seven hardest words in the English language: “I was wrong. Will you forgive me.”
- Do you resist authorities or find yourself badmouthing those God has put in charge over you?
- How much time do you spend in prayer in Bible reading? A failure to seek God is evidence that you don’t really think you need him.
- Do you ever find yourself minimizing your own sin while maximizing the sins of others?
- Do you find yourself worrying often? Trying to solve big problems on your own without trusting God’s care and power?

What are some other ways pride can be seen in our lives?

Pride will destroy you spiritually, keeping you from the help you so desperately need. If you see pride in your life, beg God to forgive you and seek to take his view of yourself and your sin. If you don’t see pride in your life, that’s probably because you are proud, and you should ask God to show you your sin so that you can confess and forsake it.

Paul was all about grace. He began and ended most of his letters with a grace wish, as did many other writers. How does Paul’s (and the rest of the New Testament’s) understanding of grace differ from the common thinking today? In what ways has your thinking about grace been changed through this lesson?